

Message Text

PAGE 01 STATE 050295
ORIGIN INR-10

INFO OCT-01 AF-10 EUR-12 NEA-10 ISO-00 SSM-03 SS-15
IO-13 L-03 OC-06 CCO-00 AID-05 CIAE-00 ACDA-12
NSC-05 DODE-00 PA-01 USIA-06 /112 R

DRAFTED BY INR/RNA/NE:AAVACCARO:MP
APPROVED BY INR/RNA:PGRIFFIN
SSM:CWKONTOS
DESIRED DISTRIBUTION
SSM

-----055691 272321Z /61

P 272208Z FEB 78
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S E C R E T STATE 050295
SECRET

PAGE 02 STATE 050295

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2

TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SUBJECT: INTSUM 509 - FEBRUARY 27, 1978

LONDON FOR KINSOLVING
PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY
OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

1. ISRAEL. THE CABINET, AT THE CONCLUSION YESTERDAY OF ITS DEBATE ON ISRAEL'S FUTURE SETTLEMENTS POLICY, DECIDED IN EFFECT TO CONTINUE RATHER THAN REVISE ITS PRESENT APPROACH. A CRYPTIC TWO-LINE CABINET ANNOUNCEMENT, READ BY CABINET SECRETARY NAOR, STATED THAT "THE CABINET HAD A DISCUSSION CONCERNING POLITICAL PROBLEMS AND THE PROBLEM OF SETTLEMENTS. THE CABINET DECIDED THAT IT DOES NOT NEED ANY NEW DECISIONS CONCERNING THOSE TWO ITEMS."

2. NAOR SAID IN REPLY TO QUESTIONING THAT THIS DECISION MEANT THAT ISRAEL WOULD PURSUE ITS PRESENT POLICY. HE ASSERTED THAT NO NEW SETTLEMENTS WOULD BE CREATED IN THE SINAI, BUT ALLUDED TO FURTHER ACTIVITY IN THE WEST BANK BY SAYING "THERE IS A PLAN RELATING TO SETTLEMENTS" THERE. FOLLOWING PRESENT POLICY, WEST BANK SITES WOULD BE ESTABLISHED IN MILITARY CAMPS. THE LABOR PARTY EXPRESSED SURPRISE OVER THE LACK OF A FIRM DECISION, AND IMPLICITLY PORTRAYED THIS AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT'S INDECISIVENESS. THE PLO ISSUED A STATEMENT IN BEIRUT THAT DESCRIBED THE DECISION AS A "SERIOUS BLOW" TO PEACE EFFORTS.

SECRET

PAGE 03 STATE 050295

3. IT IS NOT CLEAR WHO REQUESTED THE CABINET DEBATE, BUT IT IS AN OUTGROWTH OF AN INCREASINGLY ANTAGONISTIC INTRA-GOVERNMENT CLASH BETWEEN WEIZMAN AND SHARON OVER THE ISSUE. NO ONE IN THE CABINET OPPOSES IN PRINCIPLE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SETTLEMENTS. WEIZMAN, HOWEVER, HAS ARGUED THAT SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY, AT A MINIMUM THAT IN THE SINAI, SHOULD BE CONSIDERED IN THE CONTEXT OF PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND THEREFORE BE HALTED WHILE TALKS PROCEED WITH EGYPT. HE ALSO APPEARS TO BE GREATLY CONCERNED OVER THE LACK OF GOVERNMENT COORDINATION ON THE MATTER AND OVER THE APPEARANCE THAT THE GOVERNMENT CANNOT PROPERLY CONTROL THE HARDLINE GUSH EMUNIM, BUT RATHER REACTS TO THE GUSH'S ACTIVIST LEAD WITH RELUCTANT EX POST FACTO APPROVALS. LIBERAL PARTY LEADER EHRlich HAS SPOKEN IN SUPPORT OF WEIZMAN, AND LIBERAL MINISTER PATT IS APPARENTLY COUNTED IN WEIZMAN'S CAMP. YADIN AND THE DMC ALSO BACK HIM ON A "FREEZE OF NEW ACTIVITY."

4. ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN, SHARON HAS CONSISTENTLY PUSHED FOR AN AGGRESSIVE AND ACCELERATED SETTLEMENTS POLICY. HE ARGUES THAT SUCH A POLICY WOULD STRENGTHEN ISRAEL'S HAND IN PEACE TALKS. HE BELIEVES THAT NUMEROUS SETTLEMENTS ARE ONE WAY OF ENSURING ISRAEL'S SECURITY AFTER A PEACE SETTLEMENT; HE MADE THIS POINT TO THE CURRENT ZIONIST CONGRESS MEETING LAST WEEK, ASSERTING THAT THERE COULD BE NO SECURITY FOR ISRAEL WITHOUT SETTLEMENTS BEYOND THE "GREEN LINE." SHARON HAS THE SUPPORT OF THE NRP'S HAMMER, THE GUSH, AND ENJOYS THE

IDEOLOGICAL SYMPATHY OF OTHER MINISTERS.

5. DAYAN, THE OTHER PROMINENT MEMBER OF THE TROIKA ADVISING BEGIN ON THE ISSUE, IS TAKING A MIDDLE POSITION. HE SUPPORTS SETTLEMENTS IN AREAS ISRAEL INTENDS TO RETAIN, ACCORDING TO EMBASSY TEL AVIV, BUT HAS EXPRESSED RESERVATIONS ON THE SORT OF HIGH-PROFILE, DEMONSTRATIVE OPERATIONS UNDERTAKEN IN SHARON'S "EXPANSION" PROGRAM
SECRET

PAGE 04 STATE 050295

FOR SINAI SETTLEMENTS. DAYAN IS SAID TO HAVE SUGGESTED TO THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE WEDNESDAY THAT ACTIVITY IN THE RAFAH APPROACHES SHOULD BE HALTED FOR THE TIME BEING.

6. UNDERLYING THE CABINET DISSENSION IS AN APPARENTLY INCIPIENT POWER STRUGGLE AMONG DAYAN, WEIZMAN, AND SHARON. TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, THIS SITUATION UNDOUBTEDLY REFLECTS AN INEVITABLE TENSION AMONG MEN WITH STRONG WILLS AND BELIEFS. IF A POWER STRUGGLE HAS BEGUN, EMBASSY TEL AVIV OBSERVED THAT WEIZMAN, SHARON, AND DAYAN MAY WELL TRY TO USE THE SETTLEMENTS ISSUE AS A MEANS TO UNDERCUT THE OTHERS.

7. FROM BEGIN'S PERSPECTIVE, A PRINCIPAL CONCERN IS THE MAINTENANCE OF GOVERNMENT UNITY AND PROJECTING AN IMAGE OF UNANIMITY AMONG HIS MINISTERS. AMONG THE OTHER MAJOR FACTORS WE BELIEVE WILL BEAR ON HIS CONSIDERATION OF THIS QUESTION ARE:

(A) A DESIRE TO LESSEN US-ISRAELI DIFFERENCES OVER SETTLEMENTS AND THUS TO ENGENDER A FAVORABLE ATMOSPHERE FOR HIS US VISIT, INCLUDING A BETTER IMAGE AMONG US JEWISH LEADERS AND THE US PUBLIC;

(B) A WISH TO SHORE UP HIS CREDIBILITY AND POSITION AT HOME IN FACE OF INCREASING INDICATIONS THAT HIS GOVERNMENT'S IMAGE HAS SLIPPED AS A RESULT OF CONTRADICTORY MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS ON SETTLEMENTS AND OF GROWING DOMESTIC CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES;

(C) SHARP ATTACKS FROM THE LABOR ALIGNMENT
SECRET

PAGE 05 STATE 050295

OPPOSITION ON BEGIN'S PEACE POLICY AND ON HIS HANDLING OF THE SETTLEMENTS ISSUE;

(D) HIS AWARENESS THAT HIS OWN FLEXIBILITY ON THE QUESTION IS LIMITED BY PRESSURE FROM THE RIGHT

AND FROM A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF HIS TRADITIONALLY
HARDLINE HERUT AND LA'AM COLLEAGUES, A PICTURE MADE
PAINFULLY CLEAR TO HIM AT LAST MONTH'S HERUT
CONVENTION.

8. BEGIN'S VIEWS WILL PROVE CRUCIAL, BECAUSE HIS OPINION
IS LIKELY TO SWAY THOSE MINISTERS WHO ARE NOT RIGIDLY
COMMITTED TO EITHER SIDE. BEGIN WILL LIKELY ATTEMPT TO
FASHION AN AMBIGUOUS GOVERNMENT POSITION IN ORDER TO
PAPER OVER DIFFERENCES. A POLICY DELIBERATELY LEFT OPEN
TO INTERPRETATION COULD SERVE TO ASSUAGE TO SOME EXTENT
THE CONCERNS OF THE VARIOUS FORCES AT PLAY, ALTHOUGH
IT WOULD SATISFY NONE COMPLETELY.

9. EMBASSY TEL AVIV REPORTS, MEANWHILE THAT A RECURRING
THEME IN BOTH THE PRESS AND IN CONVERSATIONS WITH KNESSET
MEMBERS IN RECENT DAYS IS THE RESURGENCE OF DOMESTIC
POLITICAL PROBLEMS, AND THE INCREASING FOCUS OF PUBLIC
ATTENTION ON DIVISIVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES. THE
GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF THE ECONOMY IS THE TARGET OF IN-
CREASINGLY SHARP ATTACKS AND VARIOUS SOCIAL PROBLEMS,
QUIESCENT SINCE SADAT'S VISIT, ARE LIKELY TO TAKE ON
POLITICAL DIMENSIONS AS LABOR EMERGES FROM ITS NINE MONTHS
OF WOUND LICKING. THE VULNERABILITY OF THE BEGIN GOVERN-
MENT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES IS BECOMING APPARENT.
(CONFIDENTIAL)

10. LEBANON. THE POLITICAL FACTORS UNDERLYING THE RECENT
SYRIA-LEBANESE FIGHTING HAVE NOT BEEN RESOLVED AND THERE-
FORE IT IS LIKELY THAT SUCH INCIDENTS WILL RECUR. WHILE
THE POSSIBILITY FOR A MAJOR CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE
SECRET

PAGE 06 STATE 050295

LEBANESE IN THE NEXT THREE OR FOUR MONTHS IS POSSIBLE,
WE BELIEVE THAT A SERIES OF SHARP BUT ISOLATED INCIDENTS
IS MORE LIKELY IN THIS TIME FRAME.

11. EMBASSY DAMASCUS OBSERVES THAT THE FIGHTING HAD BEEN
BREWING FOR SOME TIME AND GAVE THE MOST TANGIBLE EVIDENCE
TO DATE OF THE GROWING DISPARITIES BETWEEN SYRIAN AND
LEBANESE CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS AND GOALS. THE LEBANESE
FRONT BELIEVES THAT BECAUSE OF THEIR SACRIFICES DURING
THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, THEY SHOULD NOT NOW BE LOSING
THEIR AUTONOMY TO THE SYRIANS. FURTHERMORE, TRADITIONAL
LEBANESE CONTEMPT FOR THE SYRIANS, WHICH IS COLORED BY
FEAR OF A SYRIAN TAKEOVER OF LEBANON, MAKES THE SYRIAN
PRESENCE PARTICULARLY ONEROUS. MANY LEBANESE ARE THERE-
FORE QUESTIONING WHETHER THE SYRIANS ARE PEACEKEEPERS
OR OCCUPIERS.

12. ASSAD, FOR HIS PART, RESENTS THE SEEMING LACK OF
LEBANESE GRATITUDE FOR SYRIA'S ENDING THE CIVIL WAR.

MOREOVER, HE IS FRUSTRATED BY HIS INABILITY TO WEAN THE LEBANESE RIGHTISTS AWAY FROM ISRAEL. RECENT CLEAVAGES IN THE ARAB WORLD HAVE ALSO CAUSED DAMASCUS TO INCREASE ITS COOPERATION WITH THE PLO, WHICH HEIGHTENS SYRO-CHRISTIAN TENSIONS.

13. ANOTHER PROBLEM IS THAT SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LEBANON, BEYOND THEIR STATED GOALS OF MAINTAINING THE COUNTRY'S UNITY AND SECURITY, HAVE NEVER BEEN CLEAR. IMPLEMENTATION OF SYRIA'S ROLE HAS BEEN HAPHAZARD AND HEAVY-HANDED. THE RECENT CLASHES, HOWEVER, APPEAR TO HAVE FORCED ASSAD TO FOCUS ON THE SERIOUS PROBLEMS HE FACES IN LEBANON. EMBASSY DAMASCUS REPORTS THAT MANY SYRIAN LEADERS BELIEVE THAT LEBANON IS BECOMING SYRIA'S "VIETNAM."

SECRET

PAGE 07 STATE 050295

14. ASSAD FINDS HIMSELF IN A DIFFICULT POSITION. ON THE ONE HAND, HE CANNOT WITHDRAW SYRIAN FORCES IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE SINCE FIGHTING WOULD INEVITABLY RECUR IN LEBANON, CALLING INTO QUESTION SYRIA'S POLICY FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS. ON THE OTHER, TO CONFRONT THE LEBANESE FRONT AND FACE THE POSSIBILITY OF LARGE NUMBERS OF SYRIANS DYING IN LEBANON COULD CAUSE DOMESTIC UNREST. OF EVEN GREATER CONCERN, IF THE SYRIANS ARE SUCCESSFUL AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS, ISRAEL COULD BE DRAWN IN.

15. AS A RESULT, SYRIA SEEMS TO BE ADOPTING A NEW STRATEGY IN LEBANON. ITS BASIC CONCEPT IS TO HAVE THE SYRIAN ARMY DEPLOYED IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT CAN CONTAIN OUTBREAKS OF VIOLENCE WITHOUT PROVOKING FURTHER LEBANESE HOSTILITY. TO THIS END, SYRIAN FORCES IN BEIRUT HAVE ALREADY REDUCED THE NUMBER OF THEIR ISOLATED ROADBLOCKS AND HAVE CONCENTRATED THEIR FORCES AROUND KEY CHRISTIAN AREAS IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE CHRISTIAN FORCES AND RETALIATE. EMBASSY DAMASCUS OBSERVES THAT SUCH A POLICY COULD LEAD TO HEAVY CIVILIAN CASUALTIES.

16. THE PROBLEM IS COMPOUNDED BECAUSE ONLY A SMALL NUMBER OF EXTREMISTS COULD SPARK CLASHES EVEN IF THE MAJORITY OF SYRIANS AND LEBANESE WISHED TO AVOID THEM. IN THE PAST, ANTI-SYRIAN ARAB GOVERNMENTS AND GROUPS HAVE CREATED DISORDER IN LEBANON IN ORDER TO WEAKEN ASSAD. SUCH ACTIONS COULD RE-IGNITE SERIOUS LEBANESE-SYRIAN CLASHES AT ANY TIME.

17. THE RETURN OF RELATIVE CALM TO LEBANON HAS HEIGHTENED SPECULATION ABOUT THE FORMATION OF A NEW CABINET. PRESS REPORTS INDICATE THAT A NEW, YOUNGER AND MORE POLITICAL CABINET WILL BE FORMED. WE DOUBT THAT THIS WILL HAPPEN IN THE NEAR TERM BECAUSE THOSE MUSLIMS WHO ARE BEING MENTIONED AS POTENTIAL MEMBERS ARE GENERALLY REGARDED AS SYRIAN STOOGES. AS A RESULT, THE LEBANESE FRONT AND

SECRET

PAGE 08 STATE 050295

CONSERVATIVE MUSLIMS WILL BLOCK THE FORMATION OF ANY
CABINET. (SECRET)

18. EMBASSY DAMASCUS COMMENTED THAT THE SYRIANS SEEM TO
HAVE DONE REASONABLY WELL IN SHAPING THE JOINT SYRIAN-
SOVIET COMMUNIQUE TO THEIR SATISFACTION ON KEY ISSUES.
THE EXTENT OF ASSAD'S SUCCESS IN MOSCOW, HOWEVER, CAN
ONLY BE JUDGED AFTER A CLEARER PICTURE EMERGES AS TO THE
TYPES AND AMOUNTS OF NEW WEAPONRY HE HAS SECURED AND THE
NATURE OF SOVIET MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC "GUARANTEES" TO
SYRIA. SYRIA PLANS TO SEND CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI TO
MOSCOW SOON TO WORK OUT THE SPECIFIC ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE
NEW WEAPONS. THE OUTLOOK, THE EMBASSY OBSERVED, IS FOR
HEAVIER SYRIAN RELIANCE ON THE SOVIETS SO LONG AS SYRIA
PERCEIVES ITSELF AS STANDING ISOLATED DIPLOMATICALLY AND
MILITARILY IN ITS CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL. (CONFIDENTIAL)
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 26 sep 1999
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CABINET, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, POLICIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 27 feb 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978STATE050295
Document Source: ADS
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: INR/RNA/NE:AAVACCARO:MP
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: 11652 XGDS-2
Errors: n/a
Expiration:
Film Number: D780090-0581
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t197802120/baaafbyp.tel
Line Count: 295
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, TEXT ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 2ca0b5cf-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN INR
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 02 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3476237
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: INTSUM 509 - FEBRUARY 27, 1978
TAGS: PINR, EG, IS
To: SINAI INFO ABU DHABI MULTIPLE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/2ca0b5cf-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014